Eagle, Tandy are low end IBM copy-cats

For the first few years after the IBM PC was introduced, IBM had a significant competitive advantage in one respect: No other computer company was able to exactly duplicate how the IBM PC worked without violating the copyrights.

They tried — oh, how they tried — and dozens of IBM copy-cat machines were introduced with varying degrees of IBM compatibility. In the early '80s, tens of thousands of machines were sold by eager salesmen as "compatible." And tens of thousands of buyers later were disappointed to discover that various quirks and problems rendered worthless many programs designed for the IBM PC.

Then, a few years ago, **Compaq** came along with a true "fully compatible work-alike" machine, one that ran *all* IBM PC software and even accepted the same expansion boards (this often is called hardware compatibility). While some people question whether the Compaq computers are 100 percent compatible, all agree they are at least 99 percent compatible. (The Compaq 286 was discussed last week in this column.)

And now, in 1985, at least a dozen additional machines that claim to be both software and hardware compatible are on the market. These machines, which for lack of a better term have been called "PC clones," offer all kinds of improvements over IBM PC, XT and AT, and often feature lower prices, greater speed, higher resolution color screens and better keyboards.

Among the companies that recently jumped into the fray were **AT&T** (discussed last week) and **Tandy**. Other large companies like Hewlett Packard, Sperry and NCR also have introduced PC clones.

This week, I will review two "low end" PC clones that already have achieved a degree of acceptance in the marketplace.

In the discussion below, "PC clone" refers

In the discussion below, "PC clone" refers to machines with two floppy disk drives, "XT clone" means machines with a built-in 10 Megabyte hard disk, and "AT clones" with a 20 Megabyte (or larger) hard disk.

A "Ferrari XT"

During the last few years, the Eagle company has had more than its share of trouble: Its president was killed in a tragic automobile crash the day they went public, IBM sued the firm over copyright infringement and the company had to reduce the size of its work force drastically to stay in business. Eagle rewrote the machine code to satisfy IBM and proceeded to offer a faster-than-XT product at a price low enough to attract many skeptics. Despite a small dealer base, the **Eagle PC Turbo XL** frequently is mentioned favorably when people discuss PC clones.

✔ Price: $3,170 (Compared to $4,970 for a similarly configured IBM XT with 512 K of memory.)

✔ Speed: At least twice as fast as an XT, according to Eagle.

✔ My review: No matter how good or how fast the machine is — and it is impressive — I am worried about the financial strength of the company.

A "Dodge XT"

Speaking of longevity and sheer "staying power," Radio Shack's record has been quite remarkable. For years, they renounced IBM PC compatibility, but finally changed their policy in 1984 with the Tandy 1000 and 1200 machines. These machines have been big hits, even though the less expensive 1000 is not really a PC clone — it runs PC software but does not accept full-length expansion boards. The 1200 is a full-fledged XT clone, accepting all the boards, running all the software and containing a 10 megabyte hard disk. Its main attraction is price, selling for 47 percent LESS than the list price of the XT.

✔ Price: $2,634 (Compared to $4,970 for a similarly configured IBM XT with 512 K of memory.)

✔ Speed: About the same as the IBM XT.

✔ My review: It's hard to knock success, especially when such dramatic savings are offered for comparable performance. Nonetheless, many corporate environments still look down on the poor image of Radio Shack — an image which Tandy parent-company executives seem unable or unwilling to address adequately. For those users not bothered by image, the 1200 is one of the best buys around.

So, which is best for you?

IBM PC certainly is the safest choice in many business situations. But when deciding between machines that perform similarly, one must weigh carefully the financial strength of each company and their "staying power" in the face of the wild profit and loss swings common in the computer industry. In other words, would you even consider one of these machines if it were questionable whether the company would be in business next year?

The BOTTOM LINE: Consider, on one hand, the company's ability to provide you with reliable service in the years ahead; and on the other hand, the price or performance advantages that it offers.

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